

Dissidents Who Have Suffered for Human Rights in China: A Look Back and A Look Forward

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Since my release from a Chinese prison in 2005, I have reported to the Commission the continuing human rights violations targeting the Uyghur people. As the Commission has noted in its annual reports, political freedoms in East Turkestan are among the most limited in China. The right to association and assembly is prohibited and freedom of speech is punished severely, as the case of imprisoned Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti illustrates. Economic discrimination, erosion of language rights and religious restrictions add to the already depressing condition of Uyghur human rights.

President Xi Jinping has attempted to codify these violations in a series of repressive laws, such as the ones on counter-terror and cybersecurity. Implementation measures of the counter-terror law at the regional level in East Turkestan are a clear indicator of who China intends to target with these draconian measures.

Nevertheless, China believes it should go further with its repression. Arbitrary detentions, forced disappearance and extra-judicial killings continue. Recent media reports indicate the Chinese government has implemented a policy to confiscate passports in East Turkestan to limit the international movement of Uyghurs. This is the formalization of a policy that Uyghur human rights groups have documented since 2006.

Islam is a cornerstone of the Uyghur identity. China has adopted a series of religious laws at the national and regional level (2015) that curb Uyghur rights to freedom of worship. Private communal religious education has been targeted for several years under these measures; however, this year Chinese authorities adopted rules to report parents who encourage their children to undertake religious activities

During the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations my colleagues and I have worked hard to bring Uyghur issues to the attention of the U.S. political community. Our organizations regularly brief State Department officials and legislators at the U.S. Congress. We have managed to mainstream the Uyghur issue into U.S. government reporting on human rights.

Most notably, I was privileged to meet President George Bush on two occasions; the first time in June 2007 and the second in July 2008. These meetings placed Uyghurs at the center of U.S. policy concerns over human rights in China.

China's heavy handed policies towards Uyghurs are creating instability and desperation among the Uyghur people. These policies have become self-fulfilling in some respects, as some Uyghurs have become radicalized in their effort to oppose China's repression. The United States should be concerned about these developments as it is in the nation's interest to support the democratic aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Uyghurs. Stability in East Turkestan, China and the Central and East Asian regions offers the opportunity to spread American values such as freedom and rights.

The administration of President-elect Donald Trump should continue support for Uyghur democrats and step up public concern over rights conditions in East Turkestan with Chinese officials. Any sign that the United States is ready to relinquish its commitment to raising human rights concerns in favor of achieving policy gains elsewhere will be a victory for China.

Furthermore, the incoming administration should exercise extreme skepticism regarding China's narrative that increased militarization and securitization in East Turkestan are justified in fighting radical Islam. The repression that accompanies security measures enables China to keep firm control of the region and suppress legitimate Uyghur claims for greater political, economic, social and cultural freedoms. The Trump administration should understand the situation in East Turkestan in similar terms to the Tibet. It is a struggle for cultural survival in the face of formidable assimilative actions by the state.

Let us be clear. Pressure works. My presence here today is testament to the success of pressurizing Chinese officials. My colleagues and I will continue to put forward the Uyghur case to the international community. It is the responsibility of concerned governments to take this case directly to China and urge reform. The Uyghur people greatly appreciate the United States' support of our plight.; however, we ask the incoming administration to publicly raise the Uyghur issue with China.

In conclusion, I offer these recommendations to the Trump administration:

1. Prioritize Uyghur issues, especially during the Human Rights Dialogue and the Strategic and Economic Dialogue.
2. Urge China to allow foreign diplomats and journalists unrestricted access to East Turkestan to independently document the conditions in the region.
3. Call on China to free Ilham Tohti and his students and all writers and reporters.
4. Ask China to change its repressive policy, which is root cause of all bloody incidents in Uyghur region.
- 5- Meet Uyghur leaders and activists at the White House
- 6- Create a special coordinator office at the State Department for the Uyghurs